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# **Struggling in the Search for an Identity:**

**The Interconnectedness between “Race” and Gender in  
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*.**

*TFG Estudis Anglesos*

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## ABSTRACT

“I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America.” (Adichie, *Americanah*, 2013:359)<sup>1</sup>

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes use of these lines in *Americanah* to portray the hardships African immigrants have to undergo in adaptation and acculturation processes. This statement would suggest that many people do not perceive themselves as blacks until they move into a cultural environment in which their “race” conditions their lives and makes them become someone different in the eyes of others. Therefore, through the exploration of “race” relations in America, Adichie exposes the many factors that determine people’s lives through their skin colour or their birth origin.

*Americanah*, a contemporary novel which explores in depth the struggles of a Nigerian woman living in the United States, introduces the figure of a new generation of African immigrants – the Afropolitans - who are best described by Taiye Selasi in *Bye-Bye Babar*:

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. (Selasi, 2005)

In this paper I aim to disclose the different factors contributing to the development of the protagonist’s, Ifemelu, self- image in her struggle for an identity as a woman and as a black person– she is a Nigerian immigrant in the U.S. looking for a professional enrichment at University. These affecting factors are “race” and

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<sup>1</sup> Further references to this book are indicated by page number.

gender, two categories that, I claim, cannot be looked at separately. Through a close reading of the text, this research uncovers the ways in which the indissolubility between “race” and gender presents a major threat to female African immigrants in the U.S. Moreover, with the analysis of the protagonist’s relationships – Obinze, Curt and Blaine – and her experience as a famous Blogger, we can distinguish the most prominent elements that contribute to the subjugation of the female African immigrant reflected through stereotypes, racism and male hegemonic domination. The analysis of “race”<sup>2</sup> and gender in *Americanah* does not only allow for the opportunity to delve into the minds of female immigrants but also to examine this inevitable interconnectedness existent between “race” and gender – a communion that unjustly surrogates black women to the lowest position in society.

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<sup>2</sup> The term “race” is used in inverted commas as a critical category. The racial discourses that emerged in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century included this word as a way to give scientific ground to the inferiority of the black races as opposed to the superiority of the white races as Robert J.C. Young clearly points out: “We can say that explicit theorizations of race began in the late eighteenth century, and were increasingly scientificized in the nineteenth” (Young, 1995: 91). Nowadays, the very scientific ground that promulgated these racial differences, and therefore, defended the very existence of “race”, is now advocating for the opposite, that is to say, the non-existence of “race”.

## Introduction

In her novel *Americanah* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie engages in the convoluted world of ‘American race relations’. Not only does she offer a wide approach to the intricate relations between blacks and whites but she also expands her boundaries into portraying the rapport amongst blacks in different parts of the world – in this case Africa, England and the United States of America. From the moment we meet Ifemelu, the protagonist of *Americanah*, we perceive a powerful character with a number of different prospects and objectives in life affected and influenced by her gender and by her “race” – a term that I will use as a critical category. She becomes a famous blogger and goes through a number of romantic relationships which undoubtedly affect her personality and shape her identity. These relationships and American culture affect her and help her grow into a strong, independent character, while at the same time creating a changed and somewhat distant view of Nigeria upon her return.

The story is sandwiched between the events that happen in Nigeria and her return back home from the United States thirteen years later. Ifemelu struggles in the search for an identity – an identity that goes through a lengthy process of adaptation as a consequence of the changes that she withstands. Her life is altogether normal when she lives in Nigeria, that is to say, she goes to school, she has a family and a boyfriend and she does not feel the burden of racism since back home everyone is like her, black. Nevertheless, as she moves to the U.S. she uncovers the many ways in which whites surrogate black people because of their skin colour. The following excerpt from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, reveals the fact that black people only become aware of their ‘blackness’ in the environment of a white society:

As long as the black man remains on his home territory, except for petty internal quarrels, he will not have to experience his being for others. [...] For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. (Fanon, 2008: 89-90)

Furthermore, the analysis of Ifemelu's relationships offers an insight into the minds of African immigrants who have to endure the challenging process of cultural adaptation and identity construction. Toni Morrison points out the basis of what she names 'American Africanism', that is to say, the way in which black people's identities are constructed in the U.S. through the American culture and traditions. She refers to 'Africanism' as the blackness that African people represent in a 'Eurocentric' learning:

My curiosity about the origins and literary uses of this carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence has become an informal study of what I call American Africanism. It is an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served. (Morrison, 1996: 6)

As Toni Morrison clearly highlights in *Playing in the Dark*, the United States are not the only ones to contribute to the construction of this Africanism. Other countries such as England, France, Spain or Germany have also engaged in the formation of this 'invented Africa' (Morrison: 7).

In order to properly analyse the social constraints that limit Ifemelu in the search for her true essence I propose to approach the novel through her relationships with Obinze, Curt and Blaine, in order to highlight the challenges she encounters and the different factors that contribute to the shaping of her identity. This approach provides me with the possibility to explore the protagonist's development through three different points of view: First of all, it is crucial to analyze Ifemelu's and Obinze's affinity as it is possible to delve into the relations established between African people, specifically Nigerians. Moreover, the examination of Ifemelu's and Curt's relationship permits us to bring out the



intricate and tortuous world of black and white relations in America from a very intimate point of view. Finally, by examining Ifemelu's affair with Blaine, the reader can access the world of African American culture and the many inconsistencies that exist regarding racism.

This paper argues that "race" and gender in *Americanah* are inescapably interconnected – this communion inevitably surrogates black women to the lowest position in society. According to Ellen Pence, "the oppression of men toward women is in so many ways parallel to the oppression of white women toward women of color" (Pence, 1982: 46). Thus, it seems evident that black women are surrogated by two groups in society, men and white women:

The same anger and frustration that we have as women in dealing with men whose sexism is subtle, not blatant, are the frustration and anger women of color must feel towards us. The same helpless feelings we have in trying to expose the subtle sexism best be the feelings of women of color in working with us. (Pence, 1982: 46-47)

In addition to that, we must not forget about the fundamental part that Ifemelu's blog plays in the novel; on the one hand, it becomes the protagonist's escape via a place where she can confide her feelings and experiences regarding 'race' and gender issues once in the U.S. On the other hand, the blog allows her to establish a closer relationship with those who are in the same situation while becoming a role model and a person to look up to. In my paper I will prove through the exploration of different blog entries that her identity as a black woman is shaped because of all the factors that have been mentioned before together with her three most important relationships and the powerful effect these three men have on her.

## **I. Ifemelu and Obinze: Maturity through Experience**

“He calmed her. With him, she could feel whatever she felt, and she did not have to force some cheer into her voice, as she did with her parents [...]. She missed him.” (Adichie, 161-162)

Ifemelu and Obinze's relationship is based on love, respect and passion. Ifemelu's decision to move to the United States in order to go to university for further studies is the most important decision in their life as it means a separation. As a strong character, Adichie presents this young man with affection and tenderness; he is likeable from the very beginning. Their relationship works perfectly until Ifemelu's life takes a dramatic turn and she is incapable of keeping up with any kind of romantic relation. In a way, Obinze offers her maturity through life experience; he is the one who understands her better since he has gone through a similar situation and acculturation process. Moreover, Obinze has also endured a number of difficulties built up against him because of his condition as black. In the above passage, even though Obinze is still in Nigeria, Ifemelu feels supported and understood by him; he is the only one who can really perceive how she feels.

This relationship is a clear reflection of the complicity and mutual understanding existing within the African community. As Frantz Fanon admittedly indicates in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “the black man possesses two dimensions: one with his fellow Blacks, the other with the Whites. A black man behaves differently with a white man than he does with another black man.” (Fanon, 2008: 1). This is due to the direct consequences of colonialism and white superiority imposed over the black community. In Ifemelu's case, her complicity with Obinze is made evident through the whole novel: he is the one that can sympathise with her and acknowledge her struggles.

At the beginning of the novel, we find ourselves in a braiding salon in Trenton, New Jersey, when Ifemelu is about to have her hair braided before returning back to Nigeria. We can decidedly say that Adichie uses the world of hair and braiding in order to show how political and personal issues – ‘race’ and gender - can become definitely interwoven. The girls who work at the salon are all non-native Americans and, therefore, it would appear to the reader that they might feel somewhat related to Ifemelu. Nevertheless, as we carry on reading, we can observe that their characters are absolutely different and they cannot associate with her in any way:

Ifemelu looked at Aisha, a small, ordinary-faced Senegalese woman with patchwork skin who had two Igbo boyfriends, implausible as it seemed, and who was now insistent that Ifemelu should meet them and urge them to marry her. It would have made for a good blog post: “A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy.” (Adichie, 21-22)

In this case, we cannot assume that there is a comfortable environment even though both women come from the same continent, and, therefore, share a past. As we have already been able to witness, Ifemelu is a very independent woman with a very strong character; she does not follow any conventions as many other women might do: she believes in herself and does not pay much attention to other people’s opinions about her choices. Moreover, Ifemelu’s interaction with Aisha – the girl who is braiding her hair – demonstrates the controversy and intricacy within transnational relationships and between “Nigerians in America, among Africans in America and, indeed among immigrants in America” (Adichie, 19). This need to feel superior and adapted to the American culture is clearly manifested in the urgency for Ifemelu to lie about her experience in America and the amount of years she has been living there when asked by Aisha:

Ifemelu took her time putting her phone back into her bag. Years ago, she had been asked a similar question, at a wedding of one of Aunt Uju’s friends, and

she had said two years, which was the truth, but the jeer on the Nigerian's face had taught her that, to earn the prize of being taken seriously [...] she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half. Eight years, she said when it was five. Now that it was thirteen years, lying seemed unnecessary but she lied anyway. "Fifteen years," she said. (Adichie, 19)

On the other hand, going back to the moment when the protagonist begins to settle down in the United States, we are explained how she meets a group of people at university who are part of the African Students Association. The following passage manifests Ifemelu's feelings towards the other African people living in an American community:

They mimicked what Americans told them: *You speak such good English. How bad is AIDS in your country? It's so sad that people live on less than a dollar a day in Africa.* And they themselves mocked Africa, trading stories of absurdity, of stupidity, and they felt safe to mock, because it was mockery born of longing, and of the heartbroken desire to see a place made whole again. Ifemelu felt a gentle, swaying sense of renewal. Here she did not have to explain herself. (Adichie, 170-171)

Consequently, it is made evident that, as I have mentioned above, there exists a strong relationship within the African community in the U.S. Nonetheless, this relationship is directly affected by factors of social class and gender as well - it is not the same for Ifemelu to relate to African people who go to university with her than to feel somewhat connected to the women who work at the braiding salon and are evidently less educated than her.

Soon after moving to the United States, Ifemelu starts a blog: *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known As Negroes) by a Non-American Black*. This blog, which acquires a large number of followers, features various posts that depict the experiences of African immigrants in the U.S. Through her writing, Ifemelu is able to express her opinions on 'race' in a very straightforward manner. In a way, it allows her to express her feelings freely, without having to think about what other people would say about her; it is also a way of helping others in her position by telling her experiences in a bitter-sweet

way. Moreover, this blog is the perfect opportunity for Adichie to make some of the most relevant remarks in the novel; by combining Ifemelu's commentaries on hypocrisy and intolerance with her experiences as an immigrant, she manages to throw a sharp critique on our current society:

Before she finally fired her, my aunt said, "Stupid woman, she thinks she's white." So, whiteness is the thing to aspire to. Not everyone does, of course (please, commenters, don't state the obvious) but many minorities have a conflicted longing for WASP whiteness or, more accurately, for the privileges of WASP whiteness. They probably don't really like pale skin but they certainly like walking into a store without some security dude following them. (Adichie, 253-254)

Thus, we can finally say that Ifemelu's relationship with Obinze brings the reader the opportunity to explore in depth the rapport within the African culture while at the same time it exposes the attitudes different groups have towards 'race' with a mixture of ignorance, self-consciousness and fear.

Additionally, one of the major concerns for Ifemelu when she first arrived in the US is getting a job. It is extremely difficult for her to find a proper job in order to survive. As a consequence, and after many failed interviews, Ifemelu decides to take a position that will decidedly alter her condition as a woman and as a black person. This is due to the fact that she decides to work for a white man who requires specific actions from Ifemelu:

She took off her shoes and climbed into his bed. She did not want to be there, did not want his active finger between her legs, did not want his sigh-moans in her ear, and yet she felt her body rousing to a sickening wetness. [...] He had not forced her. She had come here on her own. (Adichie, 189-190)

This is one of the incidents that, as I mentioned before, will affect her identity as a woman as it is the breaking point of her relationship with Obinze as she does not really know how to face reality and tell him what she has done. This is a turning in Ifemelu's life considering that Obinze becomes her confident and the person she

trusts most in an environment where she feels totally an outsider. During her first months in the U.S. his phone calls become a soothing power over her; thanks to him she feels positive about her future.

Nonetheless, from this moment on, Ifemelu rejects Obinze's calls and refuses to write back; she is profoundly hurt by her own actions and she does not want Obinze to suffer the consequences of her wrongs.

It is surprising how, after many years in the U.S., struggling in order to become someone who she is not, Ifemelu finally goes back to Nigeria and recovers her relationship with Obinze. It is then when we can finally see a 'whole' woman, ready to take up any challenge because she has finally been reunited with the love of her life. This point, the end of the novel, becomes then the closure of her search for an identity. After years of exploration, experiences and suffering, she eventually realizes that there is nowhere like home; and that is what Obinze means to her: home.

## **II. Ifemelu and Curt: Maturity through White Privilege**

“She was lighter and leaner; she was Curt’s Girlfriend, a role she slipped into as into a favourite, flattering dress.” (Adichie, 241-242)

Even though Ifemelu feels ‘a woman free of knots and cares’, when her boyfriend Curt introduces her to his family and friends, she finds herself in a situation of discriminatory attitudes which suggest feelings of superiority on the part of white women. This idea of being a black woman and not deserving a white man is illustrated by bell hooks when she refers to white women as the ones who have made it unattainable to share common interests and objectives as a whole group. “Historically, many black women experienced white women as the white supremacist group who mostly exercised power over them, often in a manner more brutal than that of racist white men” (hooks, 1982: 48).

After her breakup with Curt, Ifemelu asks herself whether ‘race’ must have been one of the reasons behind her continual confusion and hidden discomfort in their relationship. As I have stated before, their relationship is perfect; there is nothing wrong with them as a couple. Nonetheless, his white privilege would always cause a discomfort that would remind her of the differences between them. “It was not that they avoided race, she and Curt. They talked about it in the slippery way that admitted nothing and engaged nothing and ended with the word “crazy”, like a curious nugget to be examined and then put aside.” (Adichie, 360)

Their relationship - that of a black woman and a white man - reflects the real world of white privilege and racism in America. There are countless instances of covert racism in the novel, when different characters manifest attitudes of superiority and dominance. Furthermore, the lack of knowledge about African

countries is another point that should be taken into consideration as, indirectly, many people create and believe in stereotypes that are totally wrong and unjust.

This could be directly related to Edward Said's *Orientalism* as he refers to Europe and America as the inventors of the 'Orient'. In this case, Said admits that the idea that Europeans and Americans have about the Orient – we shall include Africa – is an idea that can be explored through a 'distorted lens', that is to say, the idea we have about these countries is absolutely inaccurate and contaminated: "One ought never to assume that the structure of Orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths which, were the truth about them to be told, would simply blow away" (Said, 1978: 6). We can say then, that the African culture is definitely stereotyped and subjugated to the white man.

In relation to Ifemelu and Curt, we can insist on the fact that there exists a racist overview on their relationship: black women are only with white men because of their white privilege. On the other hand, white men are with black women because they have this kind of attraction towards exotic cultures. They are, in consequence, exposed to the many stereotypes and biased ideas about interracial relationships: "When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters" (Adichie, 369).

Moreover, at another point in the story, when Ifemelu requires the help of a carpet cleaner, the man feels somewhat surprised to see a black woman owning a 'grand stone house with white pillars':

She would never forget him, bits of dried skin stuck to his chapped, peeling lips, and she would begin the post "Sometimes in America, Race Is Class" with the story of his dramatic change, and end with: *It didn't matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America's public discourse, "Blacks" as a whole are often lumped with "Poor Whites". Not*



*Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed.* (Adichie, 205)

Here, Ifemelu is not at home, her modest apartment; she is at Kimberly and Don's house, a rich family who has hired Ifemelu to look after Taylor, their son. Consequently, the carpet cleaner believes she is the owner and feels startled with the idea of a 'black woman' owning such a big house.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie herself, talks about this stereotyping and the unawareness of history and context by the dominant culture – white Americans - about African people in one of her TED Talks called *The Danger of a Single Story*:

My American roommate was shocked by me. She asked where I had learned to speak English so well, and was confused when I said that Nigeria happened to have English as its official language. She asked if she could listen to what she called my "tribal music," and was consequently very disappointed when I produced my tape of Mariah Carey. She assumed that I did not know how to use a stove. (Adichie, 2009)

Incidentally, we must not forget that, as I have discussed in the previous section, with the use of her blog entries, Ifemelu has the freedom to criticise and attack the various ways by which she feels oppressed. The blog is a central presence in the novel and in Ifemelu's life since it portrays her experience as an immigrant in the United States. It is crucial to take into account that for our protagonist, it becomes real hard to be able to discuss racial issues with friends or University colleagues without sounding too radical or even racist. In America, language addresses "race" in a very slippery way and it is not common to hear black people talk about it in such an honest way as she herself does. It is for this reason that her ideas can be misunderstood and assumed to be racist. In consequence, these blog entries serve her to express her true feelings towards a society where 'racism exists but racists are all gone.' (Adichie, 390)

Whenever she finds herself in a situation that affects her as a woman or as a black, Ifemelu makes use of her blog in order to expose the many factors that condition her identity and shape her everyday life in the U.S.:

To My Fellow Non-American Blacks: in America, You Are Black, Baby  
Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care. So what if you weren't "black" in your country? You're in America now. (Adichie, 273)

With the writing of her blog, Ifemelu finally notices how 'race' works in an environment where people fail to acknowledge the existence of racism and the subtle oppression of black women. However, Adichie's most successful conclusions appear with the interaction of Ifemelu with her lovers; in America, the most powerful force is 'race'.

### **III. Ifemelu and Blaine: Maturity through Education**

He knew about everything: she was intimidated by this and proud by this and slightly repelled by this. [...] He would be a perfect father, this man of careful disciplines. (Adichie, 384)

Blaine appears in Ifemelu's life as a saviour, the Yale professor who knows everything about fighting for black people's rights and who tries to change her from a passive observer into an activist. Nonetheless, the fact that he is African American puts him in a distanced position in relation to Ifemelu; due to his education and his high intellectual faculties he is responsible for presuming that he knows everything about the Third World. This behaviour, therefore, becomes an indirect way of racism – Blaine criticises her for writing a Blog on race but not actively fighting against racial injustice. Ifemelu finally accepts that his anger is originated from the fact that he is not a true African and he cannot relate to her as a Nigerian immigrant born outside the U.S.

As with her other relationships with men, this one also reflects the African American view of African immigrants and their subtle racism covered by hypocrisy. At University, for example, Africans and African Americans very often fail to forge strong relationships – a fact that they blame on ancestry, ethnicity and culture:

Try and make friends with our African-American brothers and sisters in a spirit of true pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans, as this will help you keep your perspective. [...] The African Americans who come to our meetings are the ones who write poems about Mother Africa and think every African is a Nubian queen. If an African American calls you a Mandingo or a booty scratcher, he is insulting you for being African. Some will ask you annoying questions about Africa, but others will connect with you. (Adichie, 172-173)

This intricate relationship between African Americans and Africans is a major issue dealt with in the novel that must be regarded from a historical point of view. To start with, it is crucial to consider the Middle Passage as one of the most direct

influences on this 'modern' relationship established between these two different groups – it is a tragic part of history that inevitably modified Africans' identities to the point that many of them did not find their place in the world. As Anyidoho points out "The total number of Africans lost to the slave trade will never be accurately determined, but even the most modest estimates are staggering" (Anyidoho, 1989: 6). The victims of this phenomenon include those who died, those forced out of their homes and also those who were left behind. As Anyidoho clearly states in *The Pan African Ideal in Literatures of the Black World*, in order to protect themselves, "it is perhaps understandable that the vast majority of Africans at home and abroad have blocked out of their consciousness the slave trade and its disastrous consequences" (Anyidoho, 9). The Pan-African ideal, on the other hand, is proved to be unattainable since it is almost impossible for all blacks to come together and leave their differences behind:

Pan Africanism has frequently taken the form of specific local struggles against racial discrimination, oppression and material deprivation. However, participants in these local struggles need to have an awareness of being part of a larger worldwide activity involving black people everywhere, with the various segments having obligations and responsibilities to each other. (Drake, 1982: 343)

The remains and consequences of the Middle Passage are still very much visible in *Americanah*. The relationship established between Ifemelu and Blaine is an example of the different points of views that both cultures have regarding blackness and 'race'. We should not forget that African Americans have always been viewed as second-class American citizens, a fact that deeply affects their identities. Their 'homelessness' – the lack of roots, home, family - is a result of the great repercussion that the Middle Passage exercised in the heart of the African experience.

Nonetheless, why is the relationship between Africans and African Americans so complex? Are they not supposed to share a common past which involves a common source of suffering and a shared sense of struggle? The people from Africa tend to view America as the promised land, a place for new opportunities which will bring them success and money. However, black Americans do not welcome Africans as their own people.

Afro-Americans focus their attention on Africa as their place of heritage, their stolen home, and the idyllic homeland from where they should have never been taken away. This is why, in a moment of lost identity, many African Americans make the decision to go back to their roots in order to explore what was left behind: “The final lesson of Avey Johnson’s<sup>3</sup> mysterious experience is that unless you can make that journey back, there is not much chance of ever making major advances into the future” (Anyidoho, 34). Many others, though, wonder whether this journey back has produced even more confusion than revelation and discoveries for “there is a sense in which it is probably safer to remain a lost child among the alien crowd of the diaspora than to recross the Middle Passage back to ancestral time and place only to discover that you cannot recognize yourself among the ancestral faces” (Anyidoho, 35).

Instead of remaining a lost –but safe- child among the alien crowd of the diaspora, Ifemelu opts for returning home. She has become a true American while at the same time she is still an expert on Nigeria; therefore, she is a ‘hybrid’ torn between two different cultures that have shaped her identity in different moments of her life. Consequently, this position of ‘hybridity’ also separates her from both

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<sup>3</sup> Avey Johnson is the 64-year-old African-American protagonist of *A Praise Song for the Widow* (1983) by Paule Marshall. She is a widow on a journey in the Caribbean, heading the direction of the white world. “The real past keeps creeping in on her and disturbing her expensive joy until she has to make the turn-round” (Anyidoho, 33-34). Her final lesson is that in order to advance in the future, you need to make that journey back to your roots, to your ancestors.

cultures. This is due to the fact that she is not fully American but she has also distanced herself from many of the Nigerian customs and traditions she was used to. Thus, we can finally admit that Ifemelu is an *Americanah* who perfectly depicts the blending of the African and American cultures and the intricacies, ambivalences and ambiguities of this combination.

On many occasions, immigrants go back to their countries because they do not find the sense of wholeness they were looking for. Moreover, they might also feel they have not succeeded and, therefore, feel the need to return to their roots in order to feel complete. Nevertheless, I believe this is not the case of Ifemelu. The protagonist has definitely succeeded in the United States – she is a famous blogger, with a good salary and a good lifestyle. In my opinion, and as Kofi Anyidoho suggestively states in *The Pan African Ideal*, Ifemelu’s return is due to the fact that she fails to accomplish a sense of wholeness and hence, her “quest for wholeness and coherence through a knowledge of the true self” (Anyidoho, 1989: 32) remains –as yet– unfulfilled.

Consequently, we can affirm that Ifemelu’s relationship with Blaine demonstrates that the stories and experiences of African Americans do not parallel Ifemelu’s reality. As Adichie clearly exposes in the novel, the transformation and the incorporation of this ‘Americanness’ that we have presented previously, are indispensable factors in the quest for survival in the U.S. Thus, we can affirm that Adichie intends to prove that identity is both self-selected and also attributed to oneself by others, by the community that surrounds us.

## Conclusion

Historically, gender and “race” have been contemplated separately, although we can already detect recent attempts that treat them concomitantly, bell hook’s work offering an outstanding example of the indivisibility of racial and gender relations. However, through the exploration of *Americanah* we can distinguish a two-way relation established between these two categories as necessary ingredients that inevitably contribute to the shaping of black women’s identity. From the very beginning of the novel we encounter a number of situations when the protagonist is exposed to various types of discrimination, including factors such as cultural background, gender, ethnicity or racial group and economic position. The significance of these diverse discriminatory layers are, as I have proved, profoundly harming and unjust to black women as they are dragged to the bottom of the social ladder.

Through Adichie’s writing we are able to see the various challenges that the female characters in the novel have to endure. This study, therefore, shows that these numerable threats are a direct result of the indissolubility of “race” and gender issues. The use of her blog, consequently, is in a way her escape route from a world that, on her stance as an African woman, makes no sense.

So, in conclusion, we can definitely claim that many African immigrants – portrayed in Ifemelu’s character - feel and suffer the pressure of a society that hinders their individual goals in life and the development of their own identities. As I have stated previously, gender and ‘race’ are decidedly interconnected and, therefore, black women undoubtedly suffer the consequences of this inseparable relationship. Ifemelu is then a clear example of African immigrants who have to put up with different situations in which – as a result of their ‘race’ – they are

discriminated against. Thus, *Americanah* convincingly illustrates the struggle that many African women have to endure in order to adapt to a new culture in order to succeed:

Ifemelu put the phone down and thought of her mother, how often she blamed the devil. The devil is a liar. The devil wants to block us. She stared at the phone, and then at the bills on her table, a tight, suffocating pressure rising inside her chest. (Adichie, 175)

This ‘pressure’ that the protagonist feels inside her chest is the perfect description of the battles black women have to fight in an environment where they are never fully accepted and, therefore, discriminated against.

Moreover, it is crucial to highlight the influence that her three most important relationships have on the protagonist: this paper has been divided into three sections according to the men that shape Ifemelu’s life and at the same time their cultural background. This is because Obinze, Curt and Blaine play essential roles in her life and, as a result, shape her identity together with gender and ‘race’. We realize then, that as a woman, Ifemelu seems to have the need to be close to a man in order to grow as a woman and feel comfortable with herself. In a way, Adichie is portraying a woman who slightly depends on other people so as to feel somehow complete. In my view, this does not necessarily mean that Ifemelu is a woman who totally depends on men and cannot do anything on her own; this could be the case of Aunt Uju – at the beginning of the novel – as she is economically and psychologically dependent on the General, a man who provides her with everything she needs. Ifemelu, however, is a self-sufficient woman who can definitely live on her own; her case, I would add, is the case of a woman who is rather ‘romantically’ dependent on other people. What I mean with this is that, even though Ifemelu has got her own resources, she feels the lack of romantic feelings when she is alone and, therefore, needs a man in order to fill this ‘gap’ in her heart – not only do they



offer her company and love but they also provide her with different elements that will shape her identity and help her become a more mature person. Obinze's life experience and sympathy, Curt's white privilege and Blaine's education and maturity bring Ifemelu the opportunity to grow as a woman while at the same time they allow her to discover the many intricacies existent within different cultures and ethnic groups. As a consequence, we should point out that 'race' and gender walk hand in hand throughout the novel as the relationships established between different people testify to: Ifemelu, her boyfriends and all the people that somewhat are important to her – for instance her best friend Ginika, her employer Kimberly, her cousin Dike or her aunt Uju.

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